A MARSHALL CAVENDISH PUBLICATION 37 IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

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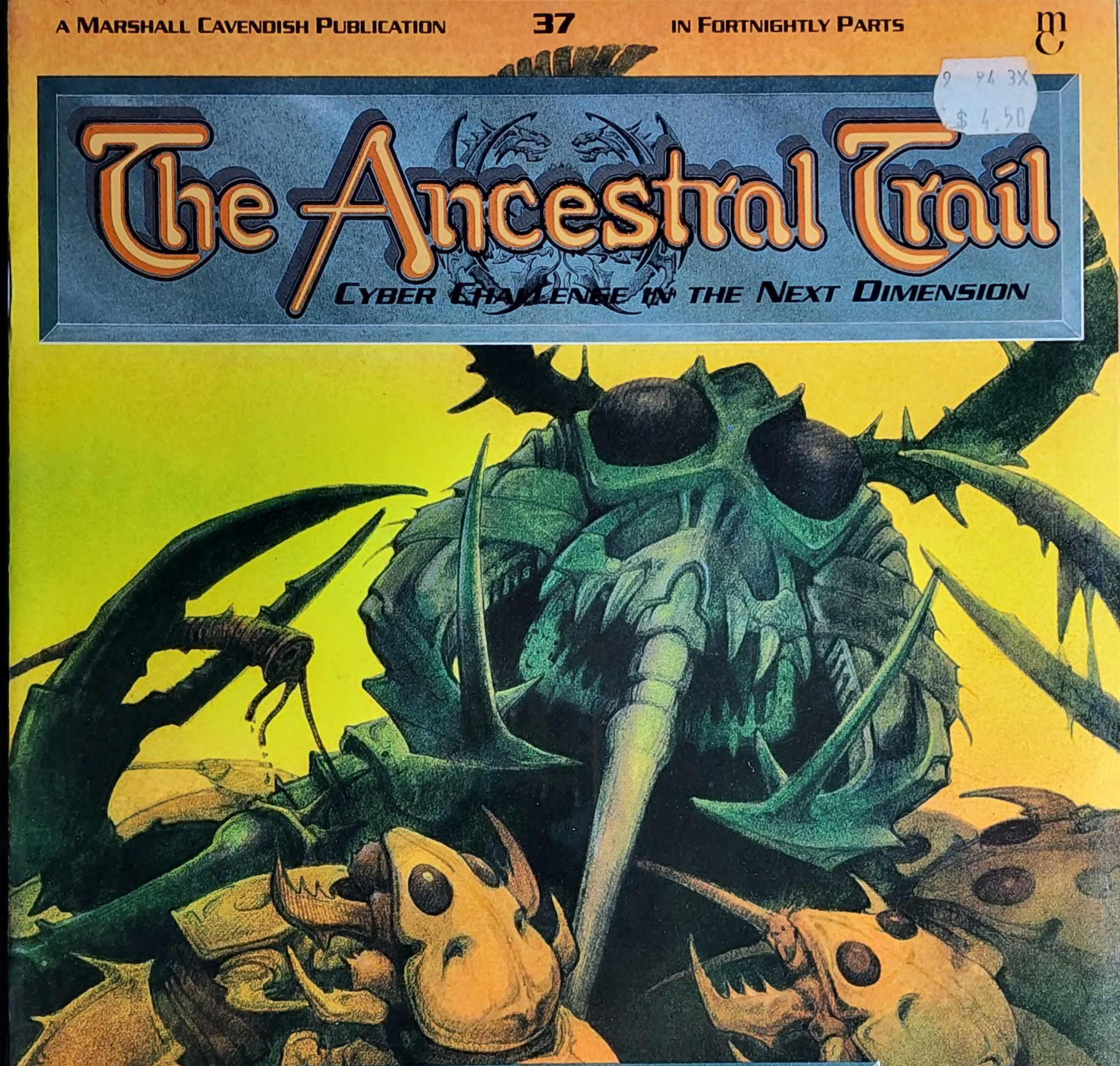
The Ancestral Trail

CYBER CHALLENGE IN THE NEXT DIMENSION



37 Cronid, Micro Creature

Horror of the cyber insects

Julek Heller

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In the thirty-seventh sector

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Metallic limbs thrashed the air as the creature broke through to the surface Richard watched in fascination as it cleared some debris from its grotesque head.

"Danger! Disengage cyber cruiser's engines!" Robo urged. Without hesitation, Richard did as he was instructed.

After scrambling out of the hole it had created, the robotic insect paused and looked from side to side. Then it set off purposefully across the cyber plains.

As it did so, Richard noticed that a thin, high-pitched wailing sound could be heard in the distance. "What's that?" Richard asked, staring at the insect. "And what's that weird noise coming from?"

Robo waited a few moments before answering. "Creature is a petromite," he said. "Mass-produced metal alloy construction. Petromite is responding to high-frequency radio signals."

"Do you mean that the sound I can hear comes from a radio?" Richard enquired.

"Negative. Source of radio emissions is located at base of nearby hillside."

Richard squinted his eyes and stared into the distance. He could just about recognize the outline of a small hill.

"Is that where the petromite is going?" Richard said, pointing towards the peak.

"Affirmative," came the response.

Mass emergence

"Well, it doesn't seem to be very interested in us. Why don't we move on?"

"Negative. Do not engage cyber cruiser. Electronic emissions attract petromites."

"Did you say petromites?" Richard said. "I can only see one."

Richard had spoken too soon. As he watched, hundreds of small holes began to appear on the landscape. From each one emerged a petromite. Within moments, he and Robo were surrounded.

From all directions came more and more of the metallic insects to join the growing horde. Marching in rhythm over the flat terrain, they began to form a column.

Column of fear

Richard sat in silent wonder. When a new arrival joined the column, the nearest petromites would stop and touch it inquisitively with long, pointed tubes. Then they would continue their march. Any damaged insects that could not keep in step were instantly torn to shreds.

"They don't seemed to notice that we're here," Richard muttered, hoping the creatures would not hear his voice.

"Affirmative. Petromites cannot hear mid-range frequency sounds," answered Robo in his dull monotone.

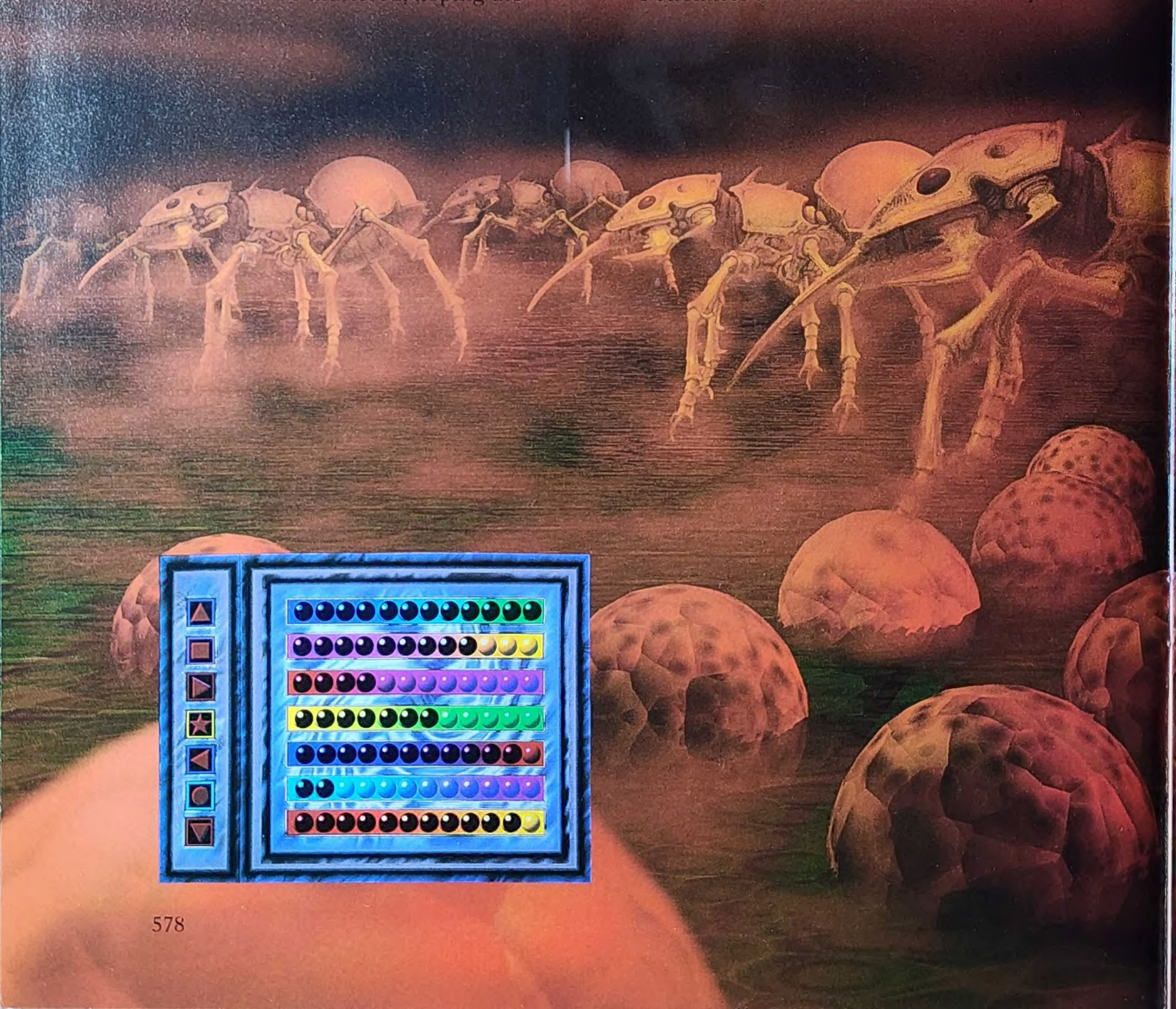
Richard jumped but relaxed again when he saw that the petromites had paid no attention to Robo's words.

"What are they doing and where are they going?" he asked curiously.

"They are collecting petroflect, an underground source of energy."

"Are they intelligent? They all look like they're in some kind of trance," was Richard's next comment.

"Petromites are mindless. Controlled by



Cronid," Robo responded.

"Cronid? Who is..." Richard stopped in mid-question and froze. Something had touched his arm.

A shiver went down his spine. Richard turned to see that one of the petromites was gently exploring his body armour.

"Robo, they think I'm one of them," he quietly said. "What shall I do?"

As Richard moved to climb down from the cyber cruiser, he saw that several other petromites were inspecting Robo's body casing with interest.

"We must pretend that we are petromites," the robot said.

"Are you saying that we should follow them?" Richard demanded.

"Affirmative. Any alternative actions would provoke petromite attacks."

Reluctant conscript

Richard grudgingly fell in with the marching petromites, fitting his steps exactly to their regular pace. Robo trundled along beside him, swinging his arms to imitate their rhythm.

The petromites seemed to have been fooled. The column absorbed them with barely a ripple, each head trained unwaveringly on its distant goal.

However, as they walked, the two travellers were unaware that they were under the watchful eyes of another being. High above them, crouched in its lair, sat a terrifying form. It trembled with eagerness as it gazed intently at the advancing column of robot insects. A cavernous belly rumbled with hunger.

Blind to the dangers that awaited them, Richard and Robo continued their enforced journey.

"Where are we going?" Richard asked.

"Destination information unavailable," said Robo. "Unsafe to operate scanners."

Richard sighed. The petromites might not hear his voice, but they were very sensitive to any electronic sounds.

CRONID WATCHES

Without warning, a new binary message flashed up on Robo's chest panel. Richard decoded it. As usual, the message seemed to have nothing to do with their situation.

Richard looked at the creatures around

him. They really were very simple machines – little more than walking canisters with evil-looking mouthparts.

Then he remembered Robo had told him that the insects were under another's control. "I hope I'm wrong," he pronounced, "but something tells me that we're heading in the direction of Cronid."

"Affirmative."

Richard's heart sank. His adventures in the Cyber Dimension had taught him that the chances of meeting a friendly creature were few. He braced himself for another life and death struggle.

"Do you know anything about this Cronid?" Richard enquired.

Robo thought for a moment.

A CLUE

"Cronid is the Guardian of the Hidden Wheel," came the reply.

Richard's mind raced. "This must be what the binary message is about," he cried excitedly. "I must find the wheel!"

As they drew closer to Cronid's lair, the strange wailing sound grew stronger. The back of Richard's neck began to prickle.

At the top of the hill, he could see a tall, irregular mound. At its base, there was an arch-shaped opening. Inside, it was so dark that the shadows seemed to spill out and stain the ground with their blackness.

Lair of the powermonger

All at once, the huge insect column came to a halt. Richard could sense a giant, evil presence lurking within the mound and he peered over the ranks of petromites ahead of him, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever was inside. Then the front rank of petromites moved forward and Cronid crawled into view.

Richard gasped. He had guessed that Cronid would be fearsome, but he had imagined nothing like this. The creature's heavily-armoured head was so huge that it barely fitted through the archway.

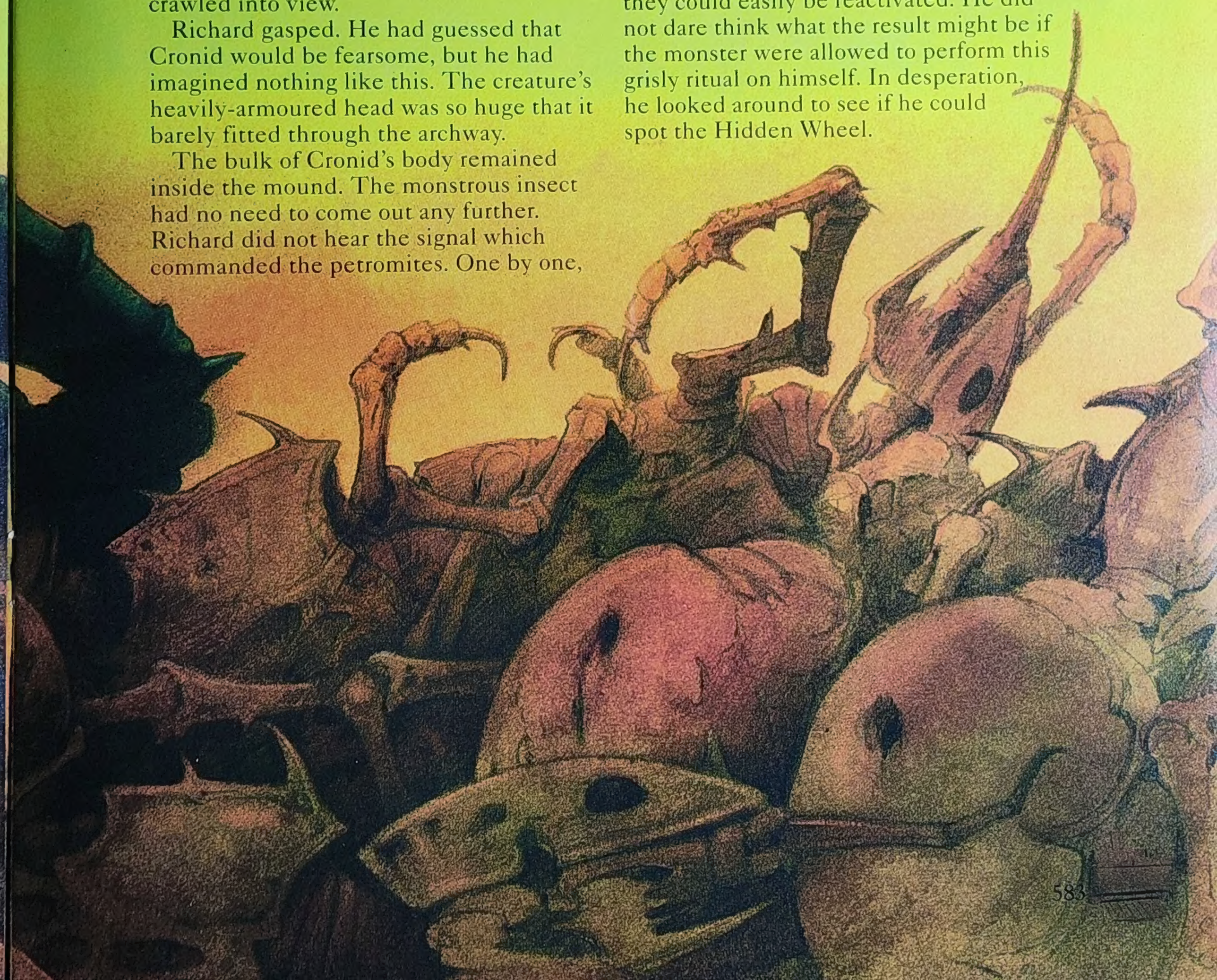
The bulk of Cronid's body remained inside the mound. The monstrous insect had no need to come out any further. Richard did not hear the signal which commanded the petromites. One by one, he saw the front rank edge forward.

Cronid's mighty pincers reached out and grasped the first petromite, raising it to the sharply pointed tube which served as the powermonger's mouth. With a crack, the tube stabbed down, effortlessly piercing the petromite's thin, metallic skin.

There was a loud slurping sound as the monster sucked up the thick, syrupy petroflect from within the petromite's helpless body. When it was empty, Cronid tossed aside the drained husk and the next petromite stepped forward.

The tyrant defied

Richard was terrified. The petromites were just simple robots and he presumed that they could easily be reactivated. He did not dare think what the result might be if the monster were allowed to perform this grisly ritual on himself. In desperation, he looked around to see if he could spot the Hidden Wheel.



"Robo, where is the wheel?" Richard yelled. "That will show us the way out."

"Hidden Wheel is inside the lair of Cronid." Richard did not find any reassurance in the robot's answer.

Suddenly, Cronid lowered its pincers and moved its great heavy head slowly from side to side. Its compound eyes fell on Richard.

"What is this?" it said, in a soft, silky voice. "A malfunctioning petromite? Step forward, slave, step forward."

With a horrid gurgle, Cronid slurped back a drop of petroflect from the end of its sucking tube.

"I'm neither a slave nor a petromite," Richard answered in a clear, steady voice, though his knees were shaking. "Look closer, Cronid."

Battle of wits

Nothing like this had ever happened to Cronid before. Its electronic brain whirred as it tried to make sense of the unfamiliar data it was being presented with.

"You don't sound like one of the petromites," Cronid said. "Step forward, that I might see you more clearly."

"I'd rather stay where I am."

Cronid's feelers twitched and his sucking tube telescoped in and out as he scanned Richard.

"Metallic outer skin... Carbon? You're carbon-based?" The monster's voice rose to a shriek as it loomed forward, edging part of its gigantic abdomen out of the mound for the first time.

Tempted forth

Richard took a step backwards.

"Impossible," Cronid continued agitatedly, "the only organic being in the Cyber Dimension is..."

"...The Chosen One," Richard completed the sentence for him.

With the rumble and clatter of a speeding lorry, the monstrous insect rushed out of its mound.

Richard turned and ran, but he had left it too late. Mighty pincers closed around his waist and lifted him into the air towards the sticky sucking tube.

"Robo!" Richard screamed, writhing desperately. "Do something!"

Robo was quick to react. Instantly, a stream of high-frequency radio waves burst from his digital speakers. "Temporarily disrupting Cronid's radio emissions. It no longer has control of the petromites."

A high keening filled the air, twisting through Richard's head and jamming Cronid's signal to his robotic slaves. The monster lurched forward as the sound sawed into its brain. Its pincers opened and Richard fell to the ground.

As he got to his feet, a tide of petromites swept past Richard and on to Cronid's exposed body. No longer hypnotized by Cronid, the creatures were filled with blind rage.

Richard had correctly interpreted the binary message. Like a hermit crab, Cronid's huge abdomen had no armour. It was completely defenceless.

End of the insect

The petromites swarmed all over the vast, unprotected tank that made up most of Cronid's body. Like razors, their jagged mandibles slashed into its metal skin.

Cronid thrashed about furiously, crushing many of his former minions, but the huge creature could do nothing against such numbers.

"I shall not forget this, Chosen One," the enraged powermonger shrieked, "and neither will my master, the Evil One himself."

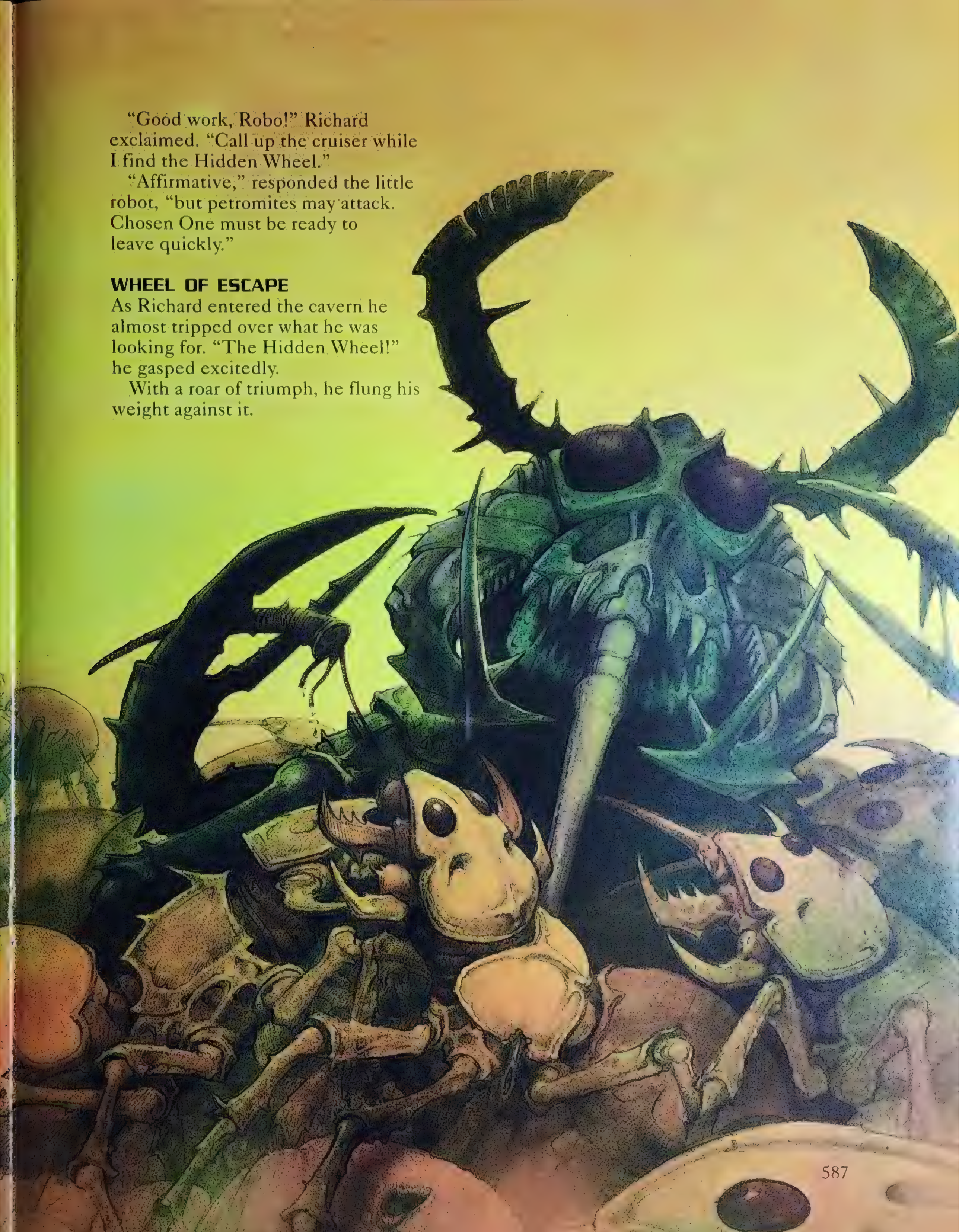
"Good work, Robo!" Richard exclaimed. "Call up the cruiser while I find the Hidden Wheel."

"Affirmative," responded the little robot, "but petromites may attack. Chosen One must be ready to leave quickly."

WHEEL OF ESCAPE

As Richard entered the cavern he almost tripped over what he was looking for. "The Hidden Wheel!" he gasped excitedly.

With a roar of triumph, he flung his weight against it.



Richard struggled to turn the wheel as the mound was filled with more of the strange buzzing sounds. He gave the wheel a final tug and fled back outside.

In the sky above them hung a brightly-lit rectangle. It looked as though a door had been opened into another world. Richard gaped in astonishment.

THE SWARM ATTACKS

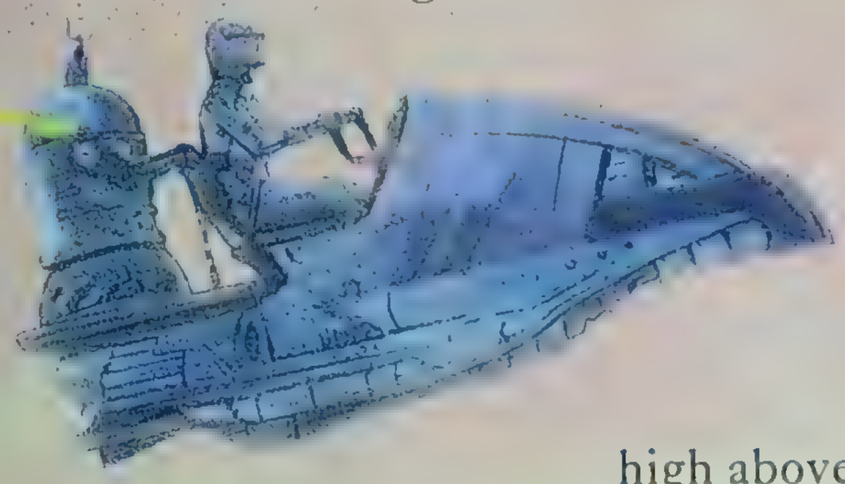
"What is that?" he yelled over the noise of tearing metal. The petromites were not distracted from their work, even by the arrival of the cyber cruiser.

"Door into next dimension," replied Robo. "Advise haste. Petromites alerted."

"No, they aren't..." Richard began, pointing at the insects that were still crowding around Cronid. A clattering roar interrupted him, drowning out his words.

An angry swarm of flying petromites came streaming out of the mound and into the air. Bigger, heavier and more powerful than their ground-based comrades, they also looked far more dangerous.

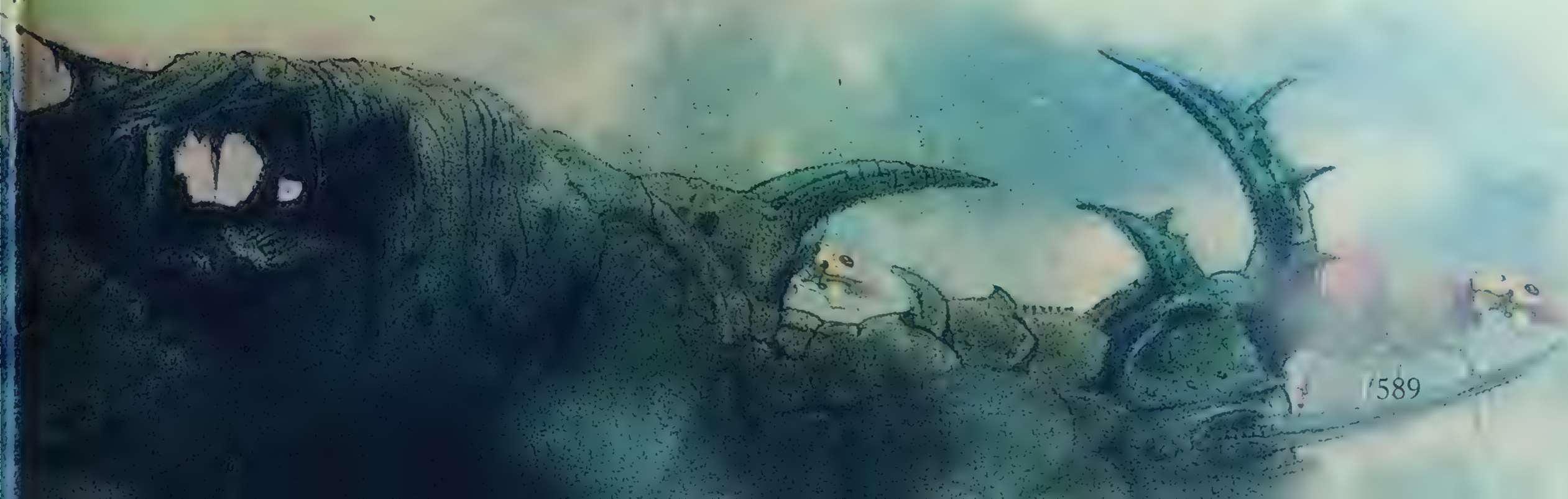
Huge eyes, designed to detect underground petroflect reservoirs from high in the air, homed in on the cyber cruiser. With their metal-crushing jaws opened wide, the flying petromites soared



high above the mound on whirling propellers. Then the swarm gathered and swooped screaming down on the intruders.

Richard and Robo hurled themselves on to the cyber cruiser. Wrenching its nose round towards the centre of the open door in the sky, Richard put on full power and yanked back on the joystick.

"Hold tight, Robo!" Richard yelled, as they powered upwards. The acceleration forced the air from Richard's lungs and slammed him and Robo backwards as if punched by a giant fist.



The flying petromites barely missed the tail of the cyber cruiser as they howled past in tight formation. The speed of their passage buffeted the flying machine about and Richard held on tightly to the cyber cruiser's controls.

Almost immediately, the swarm turned in the air, regrouped and readied itself for a second attack on the wildly rocking machine.

FREEZE FRAME

"Advise haste," came Robo's flat, metallic voice once again. "Dimensional doorway will soon close."

Richard's hands danced over the controls. The cyber cruiser shot vertically upwards, hung in the air, and slipped

smoothly through the door in the sky.

Time slowed to a crawl as they passed between worlds, and space rearranged itself around them. Richard felt as if he were caught on film, winding frame by frame through the projector and bathed in blinding light.

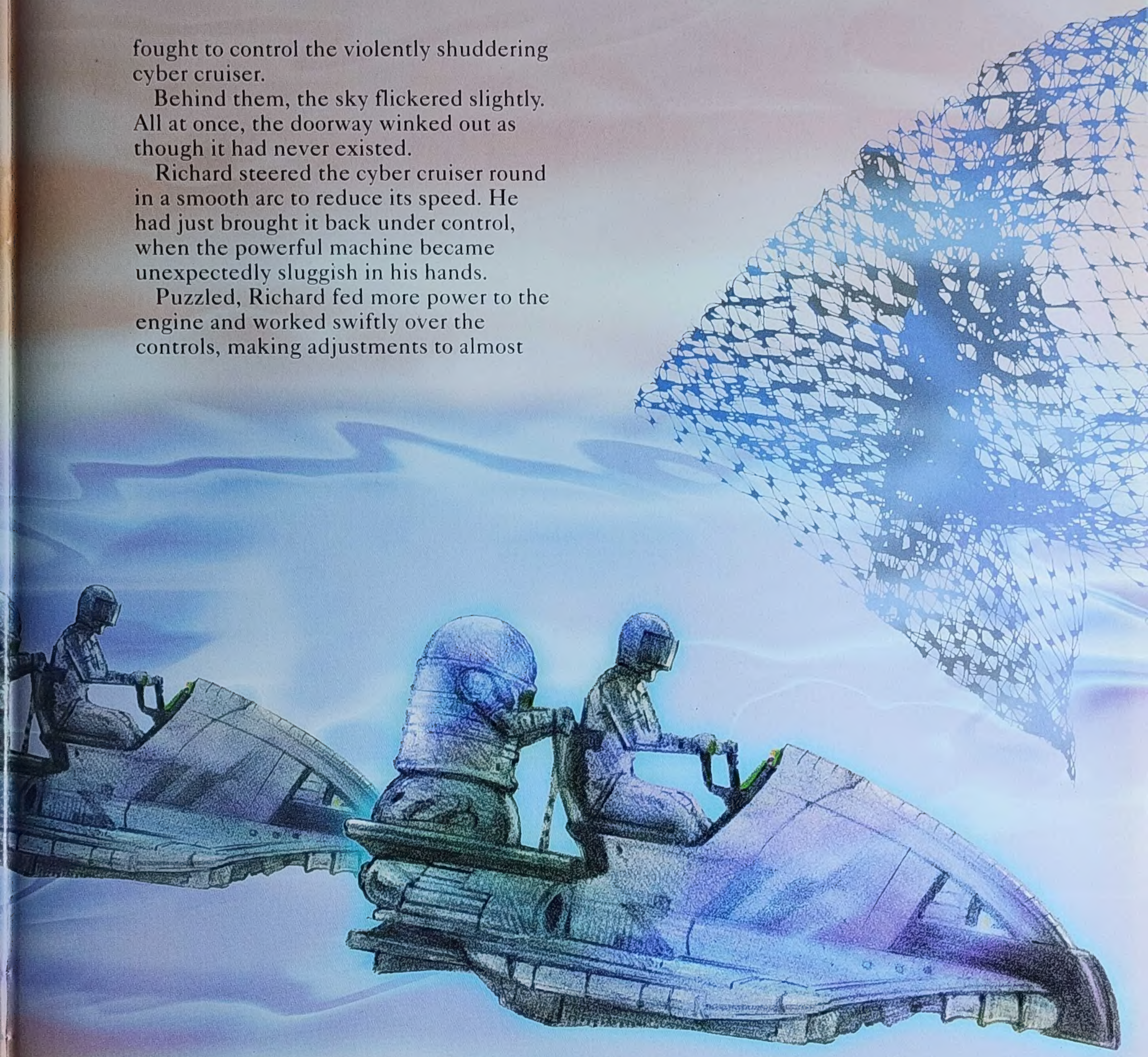
When time returned to normal speed, so did the cyber cruiser. Richard had taken it through the doorway on full power and now they were rocketing through unknown space. A short distance away, a strange, rippling network of lines hung in the air. Richard had no attention to spare as he

fought to control the violently shuddering cyber cruiser.

Behind them, the sky flickered slightly. All at once, the doorway winked out as though it had never existed.

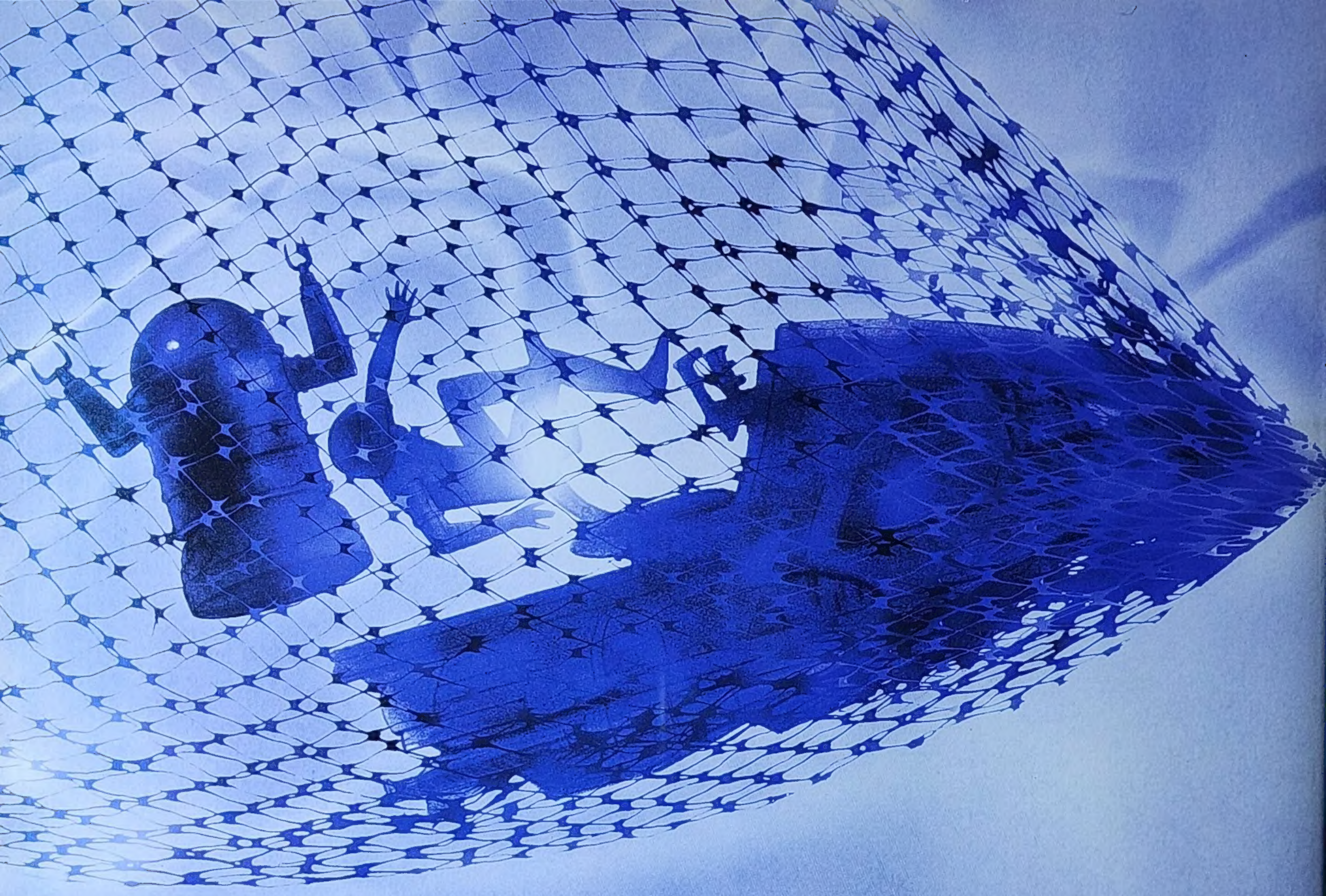
Richard steered the cyber cruiser round in a smooth arc to reduce its speed. He had just brought it back under control, when the powerful machine became unexpectedly sluggish in his hands.

Puzzled, Richard fed more power to the engine and worked swiftly over the controls, making adjustments to almost



everything he could think of.

The cyber cruiser failed to respond. Instead, it began to tip over to one side. "What's going on, Robo?" shouted Richard, struggling to keep the buffeting cruiser level. "Are your sensors picking up anything?"



"Powerful tractor beam operating in this area. Cyber cruiser cannot break free of it," Robo answered.

The cruiser lurched and began to move faster as the tractor beam took hold of it and drew it in with gathering speed.

Trapped in the net

They were being dragged towards the network of rippling lines. Richard leaned forward and peered over the fairing, but the strange lines were too far away for him to be able to make out what they were.

He reduced the power to the drive mechanism, keeping just enough to help him hold the cruiser steady in the air. There did not seem to be anything else in or near the criss-crossing lines, but Richard kept a close eye on it just in case something did appear.

"Where's the tractor beam coming from, Robo?" he called over his shoulder. "Is it something to do with those lines?"

"Affirmative," Robo replied, "network is trap device. Tractor beam is triggered by approach of objects. Objects are then dragged into network."

The network of lines began to spin, slowly altering its shape. As it turned in the air, Richard could see that it really was a net and not just a collection of symmetrical lines. The open mouth of the net swung round to face them, stretching wider and wider as they hurtled towards it.

"Hang on, Robo! Here we go!" warned Richard, as the net sucked them in. Out of control, they were dragged inside, hitting the back of the net with a jolt that brought the speeding cruiser up short and almost knocked Richard out of his seat.

SHOOMI'S SANCTUARY

Enter into the Cyber Dimension and engage optical recognition to find...

▶ Shoomi and Shoobi

Richard and Robo's faithful shadows are still carefully following his every move. Are your powers of recognition strong enough to spot them in under three minutes?

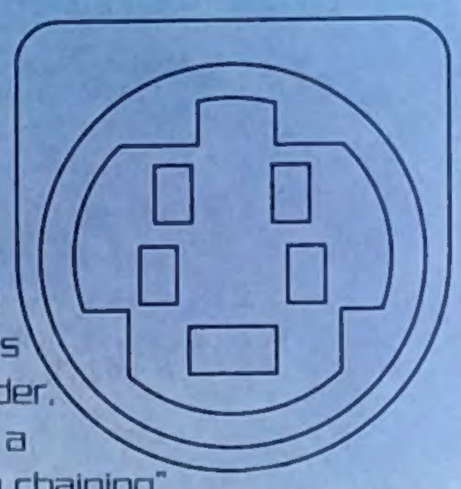
In issue 36 Shoomi and Shoobi were on page 560.

▶ Computer Challenge

Hidden somewhere in this issue is a vitally important computer component from the sinister Cyber Dimension. Use your visual skills to help Richard and his friend Robo locate it in less than three minutes.

When you have discovered the component's hiding place, can you guess what it is and what its function might be?

In the last issue, a Desktop Bus Port was hidden on page 574.



Most computers have at least one Bus Port. They are used to connect the mouse, the keyboard, and other input devices such as a trackball, a bar-code reader, or a graphics tablet. Using a technique known as "daisy chaining", it is possible to connect up to three input devices to a single Desktop Bus Port.

▶ Competition Details

In each issue you will find letter blocks. Cut these out and keep them safe. When you have collected 26 letter blocks, you will be given a clue which will help you form them into a sentence that reveals the fatal flaw in the Cyber Dimension. The prize for the competition is a super Sega Mega Drive, complete with a copy of the great new role-playing game, Shining Force.

Details on how to enter the competition will be given in a later issue.

NB The competition will be open to residents of the UK and Eire only.

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Mescon,
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Richard and Robo meet a nightmarish creature that is made from the body parts of specimens in a galactic zoo. Can they escape its evil clutches?

plus

- ▶ Two more **Techscan** cards
- ▶ More **Cyber Power** cards
- ▶ More playing pieces for the **Cyber Chess** game

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Proton, Power Android

Richard and Robo do battle with a squadron of cyber tanks. To locate the next Omni piece, they must also face a terrifying robotic guardian.

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